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Once Ever: A Narrative Short

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ONCE EVER: A NARRATIVE SHORT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
The Department of Drama and Communications

by

Yu Chen

B.A. Daitobunka University, 1997
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ABSTRACT

This thesis book describes the development and production of *Once Ever*, a short narrative film. The writing, pre-production, shooting, and editing of the film is reviewed. Script drafts and a final budget are included in the appendices.

Once Ever concerns a young Chinese immigrant couple who deal with the changes in their new life in the United States. When the girl gets a chance to step out of the Chinese community, she discovers her goal in the new environment. The boy tries to recover their relationship. However she chooses to leave when she realizes the barrier between them is the difference between their values. The title *Once Ever* means the main characters encounter; at the end, they miss the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for happiness. Such as good luck in life, people often want to repeat a good experience they have in life; but it often turns out different from what they had planned.

INTRODUCTION

The memory and interest in film in my childhood are due to the environment in which I was raised. Often people who wind up in film say “my parents took me to the theatre all the time,” such as Martin Scorsese or Wong Kar-wai. But my case was little different. My parents did not take me to movies. Most of the time I went to the movies with my friends or classmates. Beijing of the 1980’s was a simpler place than today and people lived in a simpler way. There was no internet, no cell phone, or other luxury goods from abroad. People began to be fascinated with the appearance of this monster called television. Movie was still the king of entertainment. Going to see a movie was a big deal in people’s lives. Not only because of its cost, but also because there were not so many choices as today. Generally speaking, there were only two types of film that people could watch in a movie theatre. One was the domestic movies produced by government-owned studios, including drama, a few comedies and a lot of films about World War II and the Chinese civil war. The other one was censored foreign films, which were from the friendly nations of China at that time, such as the Soviet Union, or many Eastern European countries. It has been said that every Chinese movie of that time had a audience of hundreds of millions of people. This was possible, as audiences were so limited by the film resources available at the time. People were fascinated with the films that they saw. And these foreign films gave people the impression that “we’re watching the most advanced movies in the world.” I still remember the enthusiasm of general audiences towards those foreign movies. I got a lot of chances to watch the movies about World War II from these countries. People were always

talking about each one that was newly released, because these war or action movies usually were well crafted, were set in a big landscape and exhibited a thrilling feeling that sometimes was missing in Chinese war movies. At that time, as a part of their standard curriculum, schools did take students to watch movies on a regular basis. I loved all of the movies I saw, and always looked forward the next chance to go to the theatre.

It is interesting from today's point of view that the Chinese audiences were satisfied with the limited foreign movies and didn't know that there was a type of film produced by the major filmmaking base in the United States called Hollywood. I still remember that in middle of 1980's, as a part of cultural-exchange activities, ten major Hollywood films were introduced to China for the first time, including *Star Wars*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, and *Coal miner's daughter*. People noticed their beauty and the advanced filmmaking techniques in these movies; they became enthusiastic about the movies from the other side of the Pacific Ocean. From then on, with the rise of home video and television programming, general audiences, including me, got more and more chances to watch American movies.

I went to Japan when I was 18. The film experience I had in Japan was definitely important to me and finally shifted my goal to be a filmmaker in the future. Japanese people are very good at studying other people's strong points. They open-mindedly study everything they feel important for them. Also because Japan has much less stringent censorship than China, people can easily have access to the movies from all over the world, whatever the age it was made. I wandered in the film archive of school after I started my undergraduate study in

Japanese. I remember the overwhelming feeling after I saw films like *Godfather*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *Apocalypse Now*. One of the most powerful films I saw which also changed my life was *Taxi Driver*. I clearly remember the time was Japanese New

Year when I was a sophomore. I found this movie unexpectedly in somebody's house. I felt I could clearly understand the feeling Travis had towards the mean aspects in the environment around him and the injustice in our society. That was the first time I really realized the power of a film and how it reflects the reality in life; how it moves people and touches their hearts. Another reason I became determined to become a filmmaker was my disappointment in the business world. The experience of living in Japan gave me various opportunities to get to know people from different levels of the society. I found nothing that interested me in the common business world. I felt I should be honest with myself and pursue the career that had fascinated me the most--filmmaking.

After I determined that I wanted to be a filmmaker in the future, I faced several problems. One of them was that Japan did not have a filmmaking education system like the United States of America. It was also difficult to apply to film school in the USA because I didn't know anything about film and I also needed to improve my English. Finally I entered the Film Studies major of the graduate program at Hitotsubashi University. Even today, I still appreciate the experience I had at Hitotsubashi, one of the best schools in Japan. There I was introduced to D.W. Griffith, Goddard, John Cassavetes, Kenji Mizokuchi, Wong Kar-wai, etc.. It was the first time I studied about the French film theorists such as Andrew Bazin, and the first time I participated a student film project.

I was excited to start my film production study at the University of New Orleans when I came here in 2002. Not only because I wanted to get started in my new career, but also because I was new to this country. Every small thing to native people could be a surprise to me. My time at the University of New Orleans was productive, even though there were hard parts, such as English. I enjoyed the classes I took, the training I gained in labs, the student project I

participated in on campus, the teachers and students that I worked with, etc. It was a solid program and I found the people are really enthusiastic about filmmaking. I also appreciated the experience I had in a city as unique as New Orleans.

CHAPTER 1: WRITING PROCESS

The story of *Once Ever* began with my interest in stories portraying people under their limit, such as John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), or Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* (1997). I have always been fascinated with seeing what people do under such circumstances. I believe these are the critical moments that reveal the depth of humanity. I once read a Japanese sociology paper criticizing most of the Japanese society. What people do is just living the rules uncritically, reluctant to change or face themselves. I feel it is common for the societies other than Japan. When people live in their accustomed circumstance, most of the time they don't have to figure out how to do things. People are *protected* by the environment. However, when they change location, things change. Even a minor thing in a hometown could be a big deal in a new place. People need to struggle to figure things out. As a result, they begin to face themselves. For me, living in a different culture has definitely been a good experience. It has happened twice in my life so far. It is much different than joining a three-day tour to visit somewhere. You only get to understand the culture, the values, the customs and the language after you settle down to talk, to work, in a word, to "live" with local people for a long time. In the beginning, it is always hard. A Japanese proverb describes this situation as: "where one does not know where to go." I assume it is true despite a person's economic condition. But for me it is always worth it. Really getting close to a different culture is like opening another door to humanity. It always comes with surprise, discovery and growth. An important part of what one gains is not only knowledge, but also a closer look at one's self. I cannot tell how much my view of China has been changed since I went to Japan. It is so different when you see your country from the outside world. It is like

seeing your reflection in the mirror. This is the topic I have been interested in and that is why I chose this topic as the theme of my thesis project.

My story is about a young couple. The relationship between a pair of lovers is one of the most dramatic ones in human life. It begins with fate and includes almost all kinds of happenings. Sometimes it can be even stronger than blood relationships. Sometimes it can be even weaker than a relationship between strangers. In addition, when they live in a different country, all the surface appearances become unimportant; what they face is the essential partner and that causes them to understand the truth between them. That is the dramatic moment I wanted to catch in this film.

Another inspiration for the film is from my observation of the Chinese community here in the United States of America. That is also the reason I chose Los Angeles as the location for this film. I have been told that Los Angeles has the fourth biggest Chinatown in North America. Not only the old Chinatown in east downtown area, but also San Gabriel, Alhambra, Roland Heights, Arcadia and Irvine, etc.. According to a senior Chinese immigrant, the Chinese society in LA is growing up. As a Chinese living overseas, I have been interested in observing the Chinese community in other countries. As the author Iris Chang wrote in her book *The Chinese in America*- “The story of the Chinese in America is the story of a journey, from one of the world’s oldest civilizations to one of its newest.”¹ I have tried to take advantage of the opportunities to get a closer look at this community. I still remember the first time I came to the United State; the customs officer had an Asian face. Although I knew people from all over the world lived in the USA, but it was still a little surprising for me, because I can not imagine that one would see a customs officer with a European or African face in Japan, or, for that matter in China. It is one of the amazing aspects of life in the USA. As former President Bill Clinton said

¹ Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America-A Narrative History*, Penguin books, 2003. Introduction.

“America just works better for people living in their dreams.” Specific to Chinese immigrant society, I am interested in finding out how they face the issue of how they follow their American dream? How do they preserve their old values while they become accustomed to the new environment? How do they educate their children to deal with the differences between their roots and their present environment? How do they solve the problems in their new life? I believe these issues are important for every Chinese immigrant no matter how long they have been living in this country. What I am trying to do in this film is to reveal this theme through the fate two young newcomers.

I was trying to utilize as many resources as I could to make this story unique. Early in the year, day in and day out, along with struggling in improving my English and film technical knowledge, I concentrated on the available sources like books, films and internet, trying to enrich the idea of my story. I thought about adapting a short story and tried to study existing films on Chinese immigrants. I did find several, such as Ang Lee’s *Pushing Hands* (1992) and *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), or Ai Jia Zhang’s *Siao Yu* (1995); and the famous TV series *A Peking Man in New York* (1990), etc. Some of them were impressive, for example *Siao Yu* which concerns how a Chinese woman obtains U.S. citizenship by marrying to a Caucasian. But most of them have drawbacks such as the lack of authenticity of the setups or the emotionally exaggerated characters. However, as far as I know, there is not a single one film about the Chinese community in Los Angeles. Considering the large Chinese immigrant population here and the uniqueness of California, I felt it might be interesting to depict a young Chinese immigrant couple surviving in a totally new environment. I hope this movie in some way will mirror Chinese society and will connect with my Chinese audience.

In the first version, the story finishes with a tragic ending. This was probably influenced by Hong Kong action movies. For a Chinese of my age, it was natural to grow up with Hong Kong action movies produced by filmmakers like John Woo or with actors like Chuo Yun-Fat. From today's view, their most famous films such as *A Better Tomorrow* (1985) are old-fashioned. But nobody can deny their importance to the development of Chinese film. I admire what the filmmakers of that generation did in depicting the hero and the male friendship. Actually, they are still influential today not only as a major genre in Hong Kong film, but also among Hollywood's filmmakers. The influence of Hong Kong action films can be seen in films like Tarantino's *Reservoir's Dogs* or Martin Scorsese's *Departed* (undergoing). Basically, Hong Kong filmmakers depicted their heroes based on Chinese traditional literature and the idea of chivalry. What intrigued me in writing my story was the combination of a stubborn but sensitive guy who cannot adapt himself to a new environment and a naive but dedicated girl and a devastating set of circumstances from which there seems to be no exit. This was the setup in the first version of *Once Ever*.

After I submitted the proposal, I started the re-writing process. I was told in script writing class that scripts are not written, they are rewritten. I found this to be very true. Each time I looked at the story I found some points that could be improved. There were two reasons why I felt I needed to make changes in the original story line: One is I felt the recovery of the heirloom story in the original version was not effective in describing what kind of life they lived in Chinatown. I kept thinking of using flashbacks, but it remained vague in describing how they survived in a totally new environment. The other influence was Ozu's films, especially *Tokyo Story* (1953); a film that I first saw in Japan a long time ago. I got a chance to re-view it at the end of last year. It is Ozu's sad, simple story of generational conflict where an elderly couple

visit their busy, self-absorbed offspring in Tokyo and are met with indifference. This ingratitude only serves to reveal permanent emotional differences, which the parents gracefully accept and then return home. Like most of his films, Ozu's concern is with the fate of ordinary people, examining the basic struggles that we all face in life: the cycles of birth and death, the transition from childhood to adulthood, and the tension between tradition and modernity. Ozu maintains the mood and tone without needing to portray the events that he is leaving out. Ozu went further than limiting his vocabulary of film punctuation; he also sought to de-emphasize his films' plots—the direct opposite of what Hollywood cinema of the time was doing. He worked out the entire script, dialogue and camera positions himself before he started shooting. Technically, Ozu tried to fuse his early American influences with an overriding desire to *reduce* his techniques. In his later films, he reduced all camera movement (pans, dollying, and crabbing) to virtually nothing. He disregarded classical Hollywood cinema conventions such as the 180 degree rule (where the camera always remains on one side of an imaginary axis drawn between two talking actors) and replaced it with what critics have termed the “360 degree rule” (because Ozu crosses this axis); and he replaced traditional shot/reverse shot techniques with a system whereby each character looks straight into the camera when speaking to someone else. This had the unusual effect of placing the viewer directly in the centre of conversations—as if being talked to—instead of the Hollywood convention of alternately peering over characters' shoulders during such sequences. Furthermore, Ozu decided to reduce his choice of transition effects. Gone were fades, wipes, dissolves; all replaced with the straight cut. Reducing his techniques in this way focused all attention on his characters—and their humanity shines through. I have been fascinated with this aspect of Ozu's movies. I began to wonder if I should make *Once Ever* as a semi-gang film or just make it as a story that concerns ordinary peoples' lives.

While I was brainstorming the story line, I remembered something Wong Kar-wai once mentioned about his writing process. As he often uses the same actors/actresses, such as Tony Leung or Maggie Chang, it helps him a lot in thinking about what Tony or Maggie does in their real lives. I felt that made sense and tried to incorporate it in my own writing process. I decided to use Jennifer as my lead and tried to spend some time with her. She is from Vietnam but is able to speak both Mandarin and Cantonese. She is a slim, smart, quiet type of girl who is strong willed. Also, an important point, she has a pair of eyes that can tell stories. From her image, I built character Ling quickly. She is stoic to support Yong and endures all the pains in their lives. On the other hand, the first preconception about Yong, the image of the partner of Ling, is from one acquaintance “C” whom I met before. He came to the United States in his early twenties, with little money and education. Because he was experienced, he was successful in both the construction and restaurant businesses. He was a quiet but assertive type of person. The figure of “C” became the starting point for me to build Yong.

After I had the rough images of the main characters and storyline, I felt I still needed the details of the new immigrants’ lives. Several parts still remained unclear. First, what kind of environment are they living in? Second, under what kind of circumstances is Yong losing his girl? I have been living in Orange County for more than one year, but it is still different from life in the cities that Chinese immigrants tend to live in. I started interviewing as many senior immigrants as I could. This was one of the more fruitful experiences I had in the production process. Usually the interview consisted of two parts. First, I ask them about their immigration story. Secondly, I tried to get their opinions about my idea of the film.

Moving to a different country is a hard decision. One interviewee told me about how his family started their new life in New York with only 500 dollars in their pockets. Another one

told me of her experience working in a sewing factory after throwing away her managerial position in government. Another old lady, a former doctor in mainland China, told me about her ten year housekeeper experience almost in tears. I even interviewed a Mexican who crossed the boarder to enter the United States. These moving stories deepened my understanding of how people carry their American dreams and how they adapt to living here. After the interviews, it became clearer to me why people are fascinated with their American dreams and how they deal with the gap between their dream and reality. One idea I found to be true for Chinese immigrants was that they came here with a preconceived image of America. However, the realities they faced were all different from each other. But one of the great things about America is it provides an opportunity for people to follow their dreams in their own ways; this is the power that drives people forward.

This experience helped me a lot in looking for the answers to my questions about the script. To get to know the environment of real new immigrants, I went all over the Chinese community for my interviews and research. People also introduced me to what they knew about Chinatown. At the time I was starting to revise the story, I had had a general idea of how new immigrants started their lives here and what were their goals. For my question on how the main characters break up, I found that it happened all the time with people whose environment had changed dramatically. The changing environment was the challenge for their relationship and the fundamental reason in the change of their relationships. They either overcame it together and got closer or they saw their values changed. After a few revisions, I had accumulated much more detail about the background that my characters are living in and a clearer idea of how the story should develop.

CHAPTER 2: PRE-PRODUCTION

In Asia, especially the Chinese speaking countries, many people believe the existence of 缘 (pronounced as YUAN in Chinese), which is the fateful connection between human beings, and in some cases, it even can refer to nonhuman objects. Looking back at the preproduction process, YUAN can be a perfectly applicable to my project. The whole process was like walking through a long dark tunnel. For each phrase- casting, location scouting or crew, etc.-I started with very limited information and struggled for a while. In the very end, as if it was a miracle, I found what I had been looking for.

I had the idea for a Chinese immigrant film for a long time; the environment of California would fit the story perfectly. However, I could not imagine how I could make it without the support from my school, and actors, crew and equipment. The production certainly would suffer without these resources. Thus for a long time, I did not really think about now I could do it in California before I met Professor Feng-Ying Ming, a faculty member of Chinese Literature and Cinema at California State University at Long Beach. The first time I met her was at a poem reading event in May, 2003. Professor Ming and I had a pleasant conversation at that time. She became interested in what I was doing and we kept in touch since then. A few months later, she invited me to tape the final show in her drama class. I enjoyed the whole process; in spite of the fact that the only available equipment was a Hi8 camcorder, a semi-professional tripod and an omni directional microphone. At the end of the production, I spoke to her fellow

students and asked one of the students, Jennifer Duong, to play the lead in my movie. She accepted.

Professor Ming's popularity and connections in CSULB convinced me that it was possible for me to make a film here in California. She contacted several Asian film students she knew for me. With her introduction, I spoke to Huang Hao, who is from mainland China. He allowed me to use the CSULB's equipment through his name. Also few of the other students in Professor Ming's class showed interest in my film.

Format/Equipment

I decided to shoot in MiniDV format when I chose to shoot in California. Shooting on film would be a good choice to enhance the image quality. However, for two considerations, I had to defer this choice for next time. First, it would have cost much more than shooting in MiniDV. I didn't want to risk the whole production budget. Secondly, I considered the accessibility of the film camera and personnel for assistance. Because I shot in locations far from UNO, I had to rely on other resources for equipment. By all means, a video camcorder should be more accessible than a film camera. Also, I would definitely need a person to assist me if I shot on film. Sound and lighting would also be much more demanding. I decided that I would rather not risk the whole production to shoot on film.

When I started preproduction in late 2004, I contacted Huang Hao about testing the equipment. He checked out a camcorder, a microphone, a mixer and a tripod to me for testing. That was the first time I used a Sony VX1000, the grandfather of the VX2100. I brought it out for testing both in day and night. I liked the sharp image and sound quality, and the rugged feel of it. However, several points dissuaded me to take it. First, it had no manual zoom. Secondly, there was only firewire OUT but not IN. Finally there was no LCD monitor. Also, the relatively

long lens of the camcorder didn't appeal to me. As Huang Hao was also very busy with his graduation project, I was reluctant to bother him more for equipment. I had to make a decision: either use the VX1000 or find an alternative by myself. I began to think about purchasing a three-chip camcorder. Once I was done with price research, I considered between the Sony DCR-HC1000 and the DCR-TRV950. I read a lot of reviews which praised their affordable prices and relatively good image quality. I am also personally fond of Sony products. From the beginning, I kept thinking I would not buy a professional camcorder before I had a rough estimate of production expenses. However, my wife, Swee, reminded me that "If you need a camera anyway, why don't you buy a good one?" For me, the Canon XL-1 (and of course the newly released XL-2 as well) was a wonderful choice for a camcorder because I had worked with one when I took a directing class. However the price was not affordable for a student film project. At the same time, I began to notice many reviews of the Panasonic AG-DVX100A. When Swee knew I began thinking about a Panasonic product, she asked me "Are you serious about buying a Panasonic product?" In Japan, the comparative value between Sony and Panasonic is much different. Compared with Sony, Panasonic is not highly regarded. However, my attention was drawn to the huge amount of reports on this consumer-priced camera, the first to offer 24 frames-per-second progressively scanned video (24p), which (theoretically) makes video look like it was shot on film. With its introduction, the DXV100 (and its successor the DVX100A, which is a DV camcorder offering 60i, 30p, and 24p image capture), instantly became *the* hot cameras for independent digital filmmakers. Chief among its amazing functions is a set of CCDs and a recording system capable of shooting directly to tape in a way that makes it easy to transfer directly to film without any loss of quality at 24 frames per second, progressive scan, as opposed to 60 fields per second interlaced (the norm for NTSC video). Add in audio level controls, a very

nice Leica lens, dual XLR inputs and various other features, it becomes a camera that can compete with the Sony VX-2100 and the Canon XL-1S on both video and film. Finally, the price was much more affordable than the \$5000 XL-1 or 2. After I finished my price research, I found that the price on the east coast was the least expensive. The margin between the different prices was much larger than making a trip to New York to buy it. Finally I decided not to do so, because I read from different sources that most of the stores that offered surprisingly low prices didn't have a storefront, and there could be hassles if purchasing online, such as delay or requiring the purchase of extra accessories. I called authorized Panasonic dealers all over the Los Angeles area, and finally bought my DVX100A from Express Video Supply in Burbank. I also considered the professional accessories for the DVX100A, such as matte box, wide angle lens, focus ring, but none of them was in an affordable price range. On the other hand, I understood why people said that no camera in recent memory has generated as much buzz as the Panasonic AG-DVX100 when I studied its operation. It had amazingly easy-to-use functions which includes a small dial to quickly change shooting modes, from standard NTSC interlaced video to film-like 24p. And the six individual modes and two user modes that can be fully customized, which I found to be invaluable. And the optical image stabilization which worked precisely and gave handheld shots an even and steady look. A tiny joystick above the LCD screen controls the camera in VTR mode. Pushing the joystick forward and backward fast-forwards and rewinds the tape and was easily operated in the field with one hand. I decided not to rush into the expensive accessories. Instead I would learn how to get to use it. By all means, I was happy with the decision I made, and was excited about working with it.

The monopod was one piece of equipment I got that went beyond my expectations. I got a tripod from CSULB, but finally I chose the monopod because I knew that I would be

shooting in very limited spaces and there would be a certain amount of following shots. I was also looking for a stabilization system to make the footage steadier, such as a shoulder brace or a similar device like a DV caddie system. After testing the DV caddie, the built in parallelogram, I chose to use the shoulder brace for the monopod I bought. The Manfrotto 682B, a durable monopod with detachable legs, was a perfect choice for camera support. When combined with the same brand shoulder brace, an inexpensive part, it worked perfectly as a stabilizing system.

The camera remains the most time consuming part in equipment preparation. Other parts were relatively easy to get: a set of Arri Fresnel Tungsten light kit, a shotgun microphone, boompole and mixer among other items. Also, I decided to rent the rest of my accessories which included grip equipment, sand bags, and reflectors. Luckily, the reputable equipment sales/rental store Samy's Camera has a store in Santa Ana. I rented all the needed equipment from them.

Crew

One of the fascinating parts of filmmaking is to work with people who have the same passion as you. I like team work, efficient team work. I like the process of team members sitting down and discussing the production process and serving as encouragement to each other. I anticipated an efficient team for *Once Ever* when I started preproduction.

I got helpers from CSULB, but most of them were first-timers in filmmaking. I started by posting flyers for crew and cast anywhere I could, including CSULB, UC Irvine, several community colleges and local Asian markets. Also, I was told that there was a very useful website called Craigslist which had an LA section. I put my ad in their Artist section. Finally, the flyers were successful. I got a lot of contacts regarding all the positions. I interviewed every one who applied. Most of them are students; they applied because they wanted to have a chance to practice what they have learned, just like me.

The interviews brought several impressive people. For instance, my composer Kent Karlsson. I got his response for my ad on Craigslist and we met right after that. He is from Sweden and has been an aspiring film composer in Los Angeles for more than 10 years. We had a pleasant conversation about film, music and my project. After that we kept in touch. He also emailed me useful pieces of information he ran into from time to time that sometimes were invaluable. Another person became my gaffer, Taishan Zhong. He is from mainland China too. I first asked his friend George Newnam to be my PA. Then he introduced Taishan, who works in a local Chinese news station as an assistant cameraman. He learned film production for a while and also had access to lighting equipment. He decided to join the crew as AC and gaffer. These people became the core of the crew shortly after our first time meeting. We met every week for story, production details or post production, among other things. Another key person in my crew was my art director, Phyllis Wang. I had been contacted by several acquaintances about this position before she came into the picture. However, none of them were available. Just as with the position of DP, I really wanted somebody who could be a part of the core of this crew to make the picture beautiful and unique. This was another time that I was saved by YUAN. Professor Yu Ji, a friend of mine who is a painter and a faculty member of the fine art department at CSULB, passed around my flyer in his painting class. One of his art students, Phyllis Wang, showed interest in the position. We met right away after she called me. She is from mainland China too, and has been living in San Gabriel for over ten years, thus she is very familiar with the large Chinese communities in LA. I talked with her about the story and the preproduction I had done, including the problems I had. She offered to help me in location scouting by using her knowledge of Chinese communities. And we talked about the image of the location we would use in film. After she joined the crew, we spoke to each other daily regarding the art direction. I

explained the ideal image of the room, the most crucial space that needed artificial work. Phyllis read the script and she started working on it immediately. I showed her the films *Happy Together* and *In the Mood for Love* to help her get the feeling of the room that I wanted. What I wanted for the art direction in this room were basically three things: to have a lived-in feel, match the story's need and easy to clean up at the end of the production. Actually because the main characters were in a devastating situation, I wanted the room to be as terrible as possible. She began to get useful stuff from every resource she had access to in order to make the room look like a simple space that a new immigrant couple were living in. I am satisfied with what the art department did in this movie; they have tried their best to achieve my vision while struggling with all kinds of limitations that this project faced.

Location

Location scouting remained one of the most challenging parts in the preproduction process. Basically I needed locations where they lived and where they worked. I wanted to give the audience a feeling that they were living in a Chinese community struggling with the economy. After I started the preproduction process, I asked everyone I knew for an apartment and a restaurant.

I had an image of the apartment I wanted; it was one that had an internal hallway and people put their stuff on the two sides of the hallway. You pass each family's room if you live in the room at the end of the hallway. Another one is what I saw in the film *Siao Yu*, which is about Chinese immigrant too. It was the closed style of an apartment in New York, the bed rooms are around the living room/or kitchen. However, after researching several apartments that were recommended by friends or acquaintances, I found it to be difficult to find the same type of apartment in this part of the country. First of all, it seems the internal hallway is not the style of

apartment in Southern California. The apartments I searched all had walkways outside. And usually the room was bright because of the sunshine. My art director, Phyllis, spent a lot of time and effort in location scouting. In the weekend after our first meeting, she walked me through the most typical and most popular areas in San Gabriel, Monterey Park and Alhambra, the cities that have the biggest Chinese populations in Los Angeles. Finally I picked one as the location for the apartment scene. It is an apartment complex called Golden Motel in San Gabriel. It's in motel style, but most of the tenants live there for years. It has two closed units with an external walkway and swimming pools in the middle of the yard. There were several things that impressed me about the location, including the structure of the building and the atmosphere. I especially liked the entrance. It's a hallway that leads to the outside world. There is a huge contrast between the view from inside and the outside of the apartment. It's important in this story because it supports the theme of my characters stepping out of their original world.

Besides the apartment, I was also looking for a restaurant for several scenes, including when the two are together and when he's looking for a job. There was no specific requirement other than it should be a Chinese restaurant. However, it was almost as hard to find one as the apartment. From the very beginning, I considered using the restaurant that is owned by one of my acquaintances. I didn't think that people would let me use their space if I just walked in and asked them, even when they were not busy. My kind friends introduced me to several restaurants as candidates. I went to all of them for research. Even though none of them were perfect, I was glad that at least I had these options. However, here I learned another thing--always have a second plan for shooting. Eventually, because of availability or other reasons, the once-determined location became unavailable. In the end, I had to change my shooting plan for the restaurant scenes to shoot kitchens and tables in different locations.

Another thing I discovered was that it is completely unaffordable for a student film project to shoot in a location that needs permission from the city office. In the first version of the script, the last scene was the young couple driving a car down hill and disappearing from sight. I had an idea about where to shoot, and I went to the Huntington Beach city hall for the shooting permit. However, I felt that I had to change my plan because of the various permit requirements and the cost of the permit itself. After that, I avoided unnecessary scenes in public locations.

Casting

I believe that casting is half of directing. The process of casting the two main characters was like a miracle. I found one in the beginning and the other one at the end of the process. I found Jennifer Duong to play Ling a year before. I could not get a concrete idea of the heroine for this film till I met Jennifer in Prof. Ming's class play. Even though she only had a few lines, her body language and facial expressions were persuasive and impressive. I contacted her right away after the play. She liked the idea of my film and agreed to play Ling.

After that, we kept in touch and I worked on the character of Yong. I kept my eyes open during any occasions where I could find somebody with an interesting face. Like I said in the chapter on the Writing Process, I had the rough image of Yong from the acquaintance "C", but I felt I still needed to enrich the character. When I started the casting process, I tried everything I could to get as much access as possible to potential Asian actors. I put my casting flyers on bulletin boards in several local schools and Asian supermarkets. I used online casting services such as nowcasting.com, backstage.com, and breakdownservices.com, other useful websites such as Craigslist Los Angeles; Vivinavi (for local Japanese residents); and local Asian theatre East West Players' website. Luckily all were free services. I was glad that I got a lot of responses to my ads, especially on the casting service website and Craigslist.

One of the benefits of using a casting service website was that the resume included a head shot which allowed me to make an early decision. But for applications from other websites I needed to audition them first. At the beginning of the casting period, day in and day out, I was auditioning every applicant I found. Many of them had acting experience or were learning acting in class. But I didn't really care if they had experience. I wanted somebody who could make my eyes open, who could surprise me. It is fine with me that he is still clay. In that way, we can start from scratch. It was a fruitful experience auditioning so many people. They came with all level of objectives in acting and acting education. Many of them were very nice people, but I just couldn't find anybody that convinced me "it's him" till the very end of the casting period. I got my lead for Yong in a very unexpected occasion. When the rehearsal date was determined and the location has been arranged, I had two candidates for Yong's part in hand and was about to make my last minute decision. Both of them were close to what I wanted for this character, but none of them were perfect. My wife and I tried a new Chinese style café in Cerritos. When we were in the store, Swee pointed to one of the waiters and said "Look at him, he looks like the type of guy that you are looking for." I turned my head and looked at the guy. He was tall and thin, with a typical Chinese face and a cold expression. My wife was right; it was him. I approached him and explained my project, and luckily he showed interest in it. We decided to meet the next day to go over the further details. His name is Nicholas. During the meeting the following day, he agreed to play Yong's part. I was surprised the actor for Yong appeared at the very last minute.

The preproduction period was long, and sometimes I wondered if I spent too much time on it. But I do believe I did the right things because finally I got the best I could have without any regret and I learned a lot from it. Just as in principal production, it was a "learning

by doing” process. It would definitely go much smoother and much more efficient next time. Another important gift from the process of preproduction was that it deepened my understanding of my story and the characters. The image of the characters and the story outline were getting clearer in my head.

CHAPTER 3: PRODUCTION

When I did a class project in New Orleans, I often thought to myself if only I had a car for transportation; if only I had more people to help me; or if only I had more time... I really wanted to work carefully to realize my vision in this film by utilizing all the available resources.

There is no doubt that I was influenced by Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* (1997) when I set the color tone of the footage. I was fascinated by this story about a gay couple's journey to Argentina. I liked the reddish-yellow color and warm feeling in their room and the blue, cold feeling when they were outside. I thought that also a fit the atmosphere for *Once Ever*. I wanted the internal space (mainly the apartment room) captured in high contrast and the room to feel hot and cramped. Also, I believe that if one color in the space (in this case, it is yellow) stands out, it would bring out the feeling of the story. For the external locations, I thought that the clear blue sky of California could accent or even symbolize freedom in this story. Also, in the process of research, I found that it would be interesting to pursue the story by not only *completing* the story with two main characters, but also by focusing as much as possible on the environment in which they are living. I am fond of showing a lot of everyday scenes in the film and feel they help the audience understand the story. In a word, I wanted to describe the story by showing the happenings outside of the story.

With regard to sound, I wanted to play with the natural sounds in people's daily lives. In the period of research and location scouting trips to Chinese communities, I found plenty of characteristic sounds in normal daily lives. When you stand on the streets of San Gabriel, you

can hear all kinds of sounds: radios, people talking, traffic, kids laughing, etc. And when I went to the motel for the first time, the apartment complex was isolated from the noisy street. It was very quiet but with all kinds of lived-in sounds. It is definitely a good idea for me to utilize these natural sound effects in the film.

As a result of the extra time spent in location scouting and casting, the production date was postponed. I scheduled a three week production schedule. The time on set must be used very effectively. I had most of the crew positions filled in, but only very few of the crew had previous filmmaking experience. I was concerned about how long it would take for all the crew members to get used to their positions. Also, as all of their available times were different, I felt a certain period of time was necessary for us to get used to each other. Therefore, I set up the first weekend as rehearsal and the following two weekends for production. For the scenes with only Jennifer or Nicholas, I planed to shoot during week days after they finished work or school.

The First Week

Time management was the first problem we needed to solve. Booking the location was tricky as the motel did not accept reservations. We only could check in the motel either at 11am or 11pm, and the check out time would be 24 hours after we checked in. But if we checked in at a different time, say, 2 pm, we still needed to check out at 11am on the next day. As the earliest time for Jennifer and Nicholas to arrive at the motel would be late afternoon, we decided to try the setups of other scenes first in order to use the 24 hours more efficiently. I also asked Phyllis to find at least two other motels in case Golden Motel was booked up. I also had everybody keep in mind that the location might change in the last minute.

Taishan, George and I left Orange County Saturday morning in order to get to the motel around 11 am. However, we didn't arrive until almost 2 pm as we had to first pick up the

lighting equipment from Taishan's friend's place in Burbank. Fortunately there were still vacant rooms when Phyllis and I checked in. We told the front desk person about our purpose for renting the room. He looked as if he didn't care what we did in the room as long as we paid the rent. We even had a little chat regarding film. None of us thought this would cause trouble afterwards.

The main reason for the rehearsal was to go through all the setups in the motel scenes. Camera, lighting equipment, and microphone needed to be tested in this room and the art department needed to try out what they designed for the space. I had hoped we could find out all the problems before shooting. The art department started working on the room right after we checked in. We hid the spring box of the bed in the closet and put a blanket on the only table in the room to make it look like a Mahjong table. Phyllis began to take notes about the props she needed for art direction referring the shot list. Taishan began to test his Arri kit.

There were three setups for day time and four setups for night time. I was little worried about the lighting for the opening Mahjong scene and the bathroom scene. I had the four people sit at the table as in the opening Mahjong scene. Most of the crew and cast attended the rehearsal. Some of them were from CSULB, but none of them knew each other before. Since all of the characters should be very close to each other in the story, I asked them to get familiar with each other while other crew members worked on the technical parts.

After I spoke to Taishan about what I wanted for lighting effects, he and George started to set up lights for the opening Mahjong scene. I started to work on my DVX100A. The inspiration for the opening scene is from the meeting scene from Kubrick's *Killing* (1956). In this scene, Yong should be drunk and absorbed in the game. I wanted this opening scene to provide the audience with a lot of information about Yong. What I wanted was high contrast

between the light above the table and the upper space. Therefore, the lighting design should be simple and powerful. I did not use a light source other than the light above the table. We changed the bulb to a 3200K one, and we got the effect we wanted.

I was satisfied with the DVX100A's performance on location. First, the camera is well balanced and thus very easy to use. The handle running from front to back makes the DVX-100A easy to hold and control with one hand. A flip-out 3.5" LCD panel is located on the left side, just above two large dials for manually controlling the audio levels. Two XLR connectors made the use of my shotgun microphone easier. And the white balance button was also easy to use. There are three buttons: A, B and PRST for white balance setting. The white balance values were stored in the memory at the PRST position of the white balance switch. The shooter can use 3200K or 5600K, whichever better suits the shooting conditions concerned when, for instance, there is no time to adjust the white balance. The camera worked well in both video mode and 24p cine-like mode.

After finishing the Mahjong scene, we moved to the bathroom. It was a tiny space without a mirror. I mounted a 300-watt light on a shower curtain rod. But I found that it cast a hard shadow on the actress and the shelf on the wall behind where she would be sitting. I tried different things to kill the shadow. In the end, I decided to use the soft light in the bathtub and reduce the intensity by using the bathtub curtain.

At about this time Jennifer and Nicholas showed up. I explained to them their roles in the rehearsal plan and went out with Phyllis for food. After we finished dinner, Jennifer, Nicholas and I sat down to begin script reading. I wanted them to be familiar with each setting and each line. As I got Nicholas' agreement relatively late, he only had a rough idea of the story when he came to the set. We went through all the scenes with both of them and made changes in

the lines with which they didn't feel comfortable. I was surprised that both of them understood the idea of each scene very quickly and accurately. Language was the biggest problem we found in the reading process. Originally I wanted the main characters to speak Cantonese, just because the rhythm of Cantonese best fits the story. But at the end of casting, I noticed that Jennifer was the only performer that was able to speak Cantonese. Nicholas was born in the USA and speaks Mandarin from time to time. Neither of them was able to read Chinese. I considered recording a voice-over in Cantonese after shooting. Jennifer went smoothly with her part. However, I found that Nicholas needed some time to get used to Chinese. We tried many times to read the lines, but it seemed when he spoke Chinese, all of his attention was on his linguistics problems rather than his acting. Even though we would use voice-over, I still need him to pronounce Chinese to match the mouth movement. In the end, we also tried English, and there were no problems when he delivered the lines in the language with which he was familiar. Because it was almost 10 pm and most of the cast and crew lived far from San Gabriel, I ended the rehearsal after I confirmed the shooting schedule with them. After that, Taishan, George and Phyllis remained for a while. We discussed the story and ideas about art direction. It was almost midnight when we left.

The next shooting date was scheduled on the following weekend. During the week, I set up three meetings with Nicholas to guide him talk through his lines. I was glad that he had finished school; otherwise, I could not get him so easily. We discussed the idea of the story, the character's setting and went through his lines again and again. I also gave Nicholas some supplementary materials to give him an idea of the kind of guy I thought Yong was, such as the famous Taiwan movie *Dust in the Wind*. At the end of our meeting, he felt more comfortable

with his part and the language. I crossed my fingers and we jumped into production the following day.

The Second week

During the week, other than the meetings with Nicholas, I spent the time making final preparations for the scenes we were going to shoot that weekend—securing crew, double-checking props and locations, storyboarding upcoming scenes. I left my house on Friday after I picked up the equipment from Santa Ana. Fortunately there were vacant rooms available in the motel on Friday night. Phyllis came to decorate the room with the props from every resource. After the props such as calendar, bed sheet, and pillow were in place, the room soon changed into a space with authenticity. Ryuta (the actor who played Hao) fixed the light in the center of the room. I believed that familiarity was one of the most important factors in this scene. I asked them to concentrate on the game first.

Because Jennifer was not available on Friday night, we started the shoot with scenes 2 and 12—the two scenes that take place in the couple’s apartment without Ling. Most of them were acting for the first time. We did several takes to get their action right. It was already late after we shot scene 2. George and I planned to stay in the motel. After the other members left, Ryuta, George and I started shooting scene 12. He was flexible and was working hard with what I offered. It was almost 2 am before we went to bed.

We had a full day planned for Saturday, but we had a late start in the morning-Jennifer slept through her alarm. We re-checked the costume plan and the decoration in the kitchen before she showed up. About the time we finished lunch break Jennifer arrived. We began to work at about 2 pm which was about four hours later than what we had planned. We started the shoot with scenes 14 and 29—the two scenes that take place in the apartment when she is alone.

Because it was cloudy outside, we didn't get much natural light. We had to make it look as if it was taking place in the afternoon, with soft daylight spilling in from the window. That was the part that drew all crew and cast members' attention. Jennifer was a marvelous natural talent. We did five takes in scene 14 and three takes in scene 29. She always got what I needed for the character and the scene very quickly. Then we did scene 37, in which she writes the letter to Yong. Because the table was fairly far from the window, we were limited to the 600-watt light we had brought. We had to try something with her face. It took time to get that looking right. Now I think that I should have tried more with these three scenes. I wanted to set up variations like high-contrast lighting that throws shadows on Jennifer's face, especially with scene 37 which has a close-up in it. At the same time, we were losing light for the next outdoor scene. We were able to move on to scene seventeen quickly when we were done with the apartment.

After we broke for dinner, Nicholas arrived as scheduled. We started to work on scene 12 and 4. We blocked out the scene with Nicholas and Jennifer, modified our shots to cover that action as best we could, and then started shooting. Here I made my major mistake. I was confused about the sequence that the couple should have gone to bed, and I ended up with a wrong timing for the two to go to bed. I believe this problem could have been avoided if more planning had gone into the blocking. Now I needed to shoot the opening scene earlier in the morning than I planned.

The next setup was the bathroom scene. We were under time pressure, as we had scheduled to move to Burbank to shoot the restaurant scenes. By this point, Nicholas really seemed to have found the character, and we moved at a fast pace. It was a room with limited space. Fortunately, along with the lighting kit, Taishan borrowed a wide angle lens for

DVX100A. We were able to shoot 30% more space by using that. After we were done with the bathroom, Taishan had not yet been reached by his friend who introduced us to the restaurant in Burbank. We discussed our options, and I decided to shoot scene 7 first since it had so much dialogue: a good choice, since it was an hour later that we finally we got in contact with Taishan's friend. By that time, we were about to wrap scene 7. It was originally planned to be done on Sunday morning. Taishan and I tried several times to set a natural-level look balanced with the ambient light. Finally we put the soft light inside the door, and put one Fresnel at a 90 degree angle to it.

Taishan got bad news from his friend--the Burbank location was not available anymore on that night. We were forced to change our shooting plan. There was no time for us to sit down and discuss how we could shoot the restaurant scenes. At least we were in the motel, I was thinking about utilizing the time and location and finishing all the scenes in motel that night, no matter when they were originally planned. I really wanted to give my actors a break, but I couldn't. It was close to midnight and my actors, especially Jennifer, had been working for more than five hours continuously.

The next to last scene was in the kitchen, in which Jennifer was reading while Yong is playing Mahjong with his buddies. I found Jennifer leaning against the wall while I ran the camera. It was an unexpected addition to the film and fit the story perfectly. But she didn't act in that scene at all, because she was really exhausted.

I am glad that I wrapped almost all of the scenes that took place in the motel. Nobody imagined that we would have to leave the motel before we planned. When we were in about the third take of the very last scene, the front desk person (a different gentleman than the person with whom we had talked about our shooting the first time) came in and called me to his office. He

complained that he didn't know what we were doing, and too many people were in the room; too much electricity was being used, etc. I explained that I had talked with the previous front desk person about our plan, but he did not listen to me. At the end of the conversation, I agreed to check-out before we had scheduled. In the end, we left the hotel about 2 am.

The Third Week

As Taishan was still unable to contact his friend, I had to find another restaurant by myself. I decided to use a take-out shop that my friend introduced me to before and shoot the kitchen and table separately. I called my friend and secured a time that the shop was closed. It was in Torrance, the following Saturday afternoon, Nicholas and I grabbed the kitchen scene. For the table scene, we used a Chinese café called Xiao Mei in San Gabriel, which is always busy. Actually that was one of the most popular spots in that area. Fortunately it was bright enough in the restaurant, and the shoot went pleasantly smooth.

A Westminster location was planned as an alternative for the Burbank location. Eventually it turned out to be a good choice. After we arrived there on the following Friday, we first wrapped the bus stop scene, and then we moved to the parking lot in front of the grocery store Staters Bro. There I made a mistake in using the reflector. The shadow on the actor's face was eliminated, but it still seemed too bright and unnatural. As we had to finish shooting before Jennifer left for work, we needed to hurry up. We moved on to Westminster Park for the separation scene. It was in front of the police station and the court house with a clock tower which I thought was good for the story. Nicholas played most of the action in the scene. We blocked his action first, and then we started. He tried very hard, but was still distracted by the unfamiliar language. We took seven takes for the part where he approaches Ling until we got it right. We wrapped Jennifer just around two o'clock as we planned.

The scene of Ping's dorm was another substitute for the lost Burbank location. In the end, I decided to use the living room in my place. The lighting scheme was challenging when we shot the scene where she sits on the bed in the dark. We had light but no grip equipment. After trying several times, we shaded the light successfully then shot Jennifer's reaction shot which we hadn't been able to do at the motel. It was also close to midnight, and Jennifer was again exhausted. Meanwhile, I couldn't wait to start my post-production.

CHAPTER 4: POST-PRODUCTION

Personally, I prefer Adobe Premiere 6.5 for editing, but after testing it, I found that there are glitches when I export the 24p footage to DVD. I also considered several other software systems, including Avid Xpress Pro HD 5.1 and Canopus Edius 3. Avid is reputable but the system requirements, such as Open GL graphics cards, were too expensive. Finally I chose Adobe Premiere Pro 1.5 which worked smoothly when I tested the footage I shot. So far, I haven't noticed any big differences between Premiere 6.5 and the new version Pro 1.5 except it is compatible with the footage shot in 24p. The new version kept most of the functions from 6.5 which are very user-friendly. There were a few functions that I had to save for the next project, such as surround sound 5.1, etc. As I was under time pressure for editing and it was hard to access any knowledgeable person for advice, I decided not risk the completion of the whole film.

It was exciting to see my story come to life. Actually, I checked the footage whenever I could during the principal production. This is another benefit of shooting in MiniDV--saving me the time needed for film development. I also made a rough cut when the shooting was half way through. I showed it to Jennifer and Nicholas to discuss how to improve their performance. J. Luc Goddard once said that the most important thing in the world is communication. It is especially applicable to filmmaking. Despite how much they are familiar with the story, cast and crew members always seek guidance from the director for what to do in the next scene or how the film should be done as a whole. By all means, a large part of the output relies on how clearly the director describes his or her ideas to other production personnel. As we always were limited

by shooting time, we didn't have the luxury to check my actors' performances through a monitor when we were on set. Always being directed from the other side of camera, I thought they must have been curious about questions such as why should I do this but not that? How was it? We enjoyed the rough cut, and I pointed out several points that we had problems with. They were glad to check their performances and it helped in the rest of the production.

The process of film production is an adventure, especially for a project that was started from next to nothing like *Once Ever*. I have been fascinated by the discoveries that I made in every step of the production process. It was something that went beyond the evaluation of how close it was to what I envisioned. It was like walking around in a secret garden--I never knew what surprise wait at the next corner. These surprises always inspire me to try more, to even make changes to enrich my story telling. For example, in the shooting of the beginning scene, I noticed that there was one moment that was completely comfortable for first timer actor Nicholas to act--when he smokes. When he smokes as usual, he knits his brow, an action that is so natural even when he is in front of the camera. More importantly, it perfectly fits the character Yong. Since then, I intentionally let him to use cigarettes as a prop, and it worked. I believe the gesture of smoking helps him a lot to build the character Yong. Another discovery I made from Jennifer are her facial expressions. As I mentioned before, she is a natural talent. I did not have to do many takes in most of her parts. However, I found the most powerful moments I captured with her was when she was in silence. Actually in her scenes she just did them as she does in her private life. If she does react largely to something, such as laughing or crying, she is very composed. I decided that using off-screen voice-over rather than a lot of dialogue not work better for her. I also experienced the excitement of discovery in the editing process. I carefully watched each take when I captured it from the MiniDV tape. Many times, I found different answers or a

better choice for editing by doing so. Sometimes, it was a shot that was from a different angle; sometimes, it was adding an insert and sometimes, it was the use of music or location sound. It helped a lot in realizing my vision for this story.

I enjoyed the editing process a lot. I remember every moment we spent to realize it on tape. Sometimes it was a hard decision to make because I knew how difficult it was to get in the first place. I did several make-up scenes to correct mistakes from the first shoot; another benefit of using video media. Sometimes it was not the retake of a whole scene but just a short part in between two scenes. For instance, the scenes of Ling's reaction shot in the beginning scene, the first part of Ling and Yong at the door way of toilet in the scene with Hao that we were not be able to do in the motel. They helped in making the flow of the story smoother.

Dealing with the sound was a challenging part in the editing process. Sometimes, the sound could only be done in the post production process. For instance, in the walkway scene, the actors' standing point was just in front of the air conditioner next door. Or the refrigerator sound in the restaurant kitchen that we used. I was unable to shut them down when I was in shooting. I tried several things to deal with these unnecessary background sounds. One was to mask them in the editing process, such as using Sound Forge. Second was to record voice-over to replace the dialogue that was recorded at a low volume, and the third was to utilize another location sound to make the location sound more natural.

I contacted another faculty member I knew at CSULB, Jeff Winter, to use their facilities to reduce noise and record a voice over. He is the director of a multimedia lab in their Language Art building. He was very kind and gave me advice in using their software such as Sound Forge and their recording facilities. Finally I found that the Denoise function in Sound Forge was very helpful to me in reducing the background noise.

I arranged a time right after Jennifer's mid-term exam to record the voice-over. She was tired but very cooperative in recording. I prepared two versions of the script, one in Chinese and the other in English. It took longer than I thought because some words we needed to confirm. Even though she speaks Cantonese at home, there were still some words we encountered that were hard for her to translate. In addition, she doesn't know written Chinese. Fortunately we had Swee with us to help. She did most of the translation and confirmation. This was another time that made me to think of the power of language. There is a huge difference between the original text and its translation. I found the meaning was largely weakened through translation even though Mandarin and Cantonese share similarities. We used the facility in Jeff Winter's lab for recording. It was like directing actors to act on set. After a few tries, she was used to the microphone and the rest of the recording went smoothly.

After finishing the rough cut, I noticed that I needed a lot of environmental sound. I brought the microphone I checked out from CSULB with me when I had opportunities to go to Chinese restaurants. Sometimes the door of the kitchen is along the way to the bathroom. I assume the employees of the restaurants I went to were curious-what is this guy doing with a bag in hand? I also tried to obtain the ambient sounds from the motel we used. That was successful too. Also, fortunately there is a radio station in San Gabriel broadcasting programs in Cantonese. I recorded a lot of their programs for use as environmental sound. Combined with the songs I owned in Cantonese, I had a huge amount of sound material to use in the footage.

I had a rough idea of what kind of music I wanted to use. I had decided to use Hong Kong singer Jacky Cheung's "*Promise*" in the film before I started production. It was a turning point in my brainstorming process for the story. The song describes the feeling a separated couple bear when they meet again after many years. I liked the flowing melody and the poetic

lyrics of it and thought it fit *Once Ever* perfectly. Another source was my collection of popular Chinese pop singers. These sounds contribute a lot to enhancing the image.

Talking with my composer, Kent Carlsson, was a good experience. He watched the footage and gave me several comments on sound effects. He thought I would like to use Asian or Chinese music for the footage. However, I didn't care where it was from as long as it fit the theme of the story. I hoped the music would match the theme and the background of the story. I told him in our first meeting that I wanted to play with the location sound, such as traffic, radios or people talking. He worked very hard on it and searched everywhere that was accessible for him to get the environmental sound and desired music. In the end, I was very satisfied with the music we chose.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

I am very proud of making *Once Ever* regarding a Chinese immigrant couple's life. It provided me a lot of room to create the world of the characters and has been a very productive experience for me.

I learned a lot from the process of making *Once Ever*. Sometimes I thought that my thesis book could be also titled as "A narrative of a stranger making a student film in Los Angeles." From the producing aspect, it was definitely a positive experience to go through every step of making this film. After I filled in the application form for using the casting service on Breakdownservices.com, I noticed that I filled in my name everywhere in the form-director, producer, casting director, UPM, location manager, etc. It was like "Wow, all me." Sometimes it just appeared as the most efficient way to go. For me, it was a part of the nature of low budget student films, especially a project that starts from next to nothing such as *Once Ever*. I would not have the understanding I have now if I have not experienced the whole process. Again, it was a "learning by doing" process and it was worth it. Next time, I will definitely do it more efficiently.

At the same time, from the production side, it was a wonderful experience to pursue my vision of this idea. It was also an opportunity to practice what I have learned in books and it showed me which parts I still need to improve on. As I stated before, to learn how to overcome these "if only's" in my previous filmmaking experiences is something I hope to carry away with me from this project. In the end, they are still there-- if only I had more time working on the sound; if only I had more time for rehearsing; if only I had a device to mount a camera on a car.

however, I realized that in a certain way, “if only’s” are a part of this job. Each time we just have different sets of them.

I also have learned many things about being a director, the one who leads the production. I have learned how careful preparations save everybody’s time, labor and money; how important it is to choose the people you trust to be your colleagues; how important it is to work carefully no matter how much pressure you are facing; and how important it is to stick to your vision. I have seen this in the interviews of directors many times. You need to be true to your vision and stick to it. As Ozu said, “About the trivial things, follow the trend; about the important things, follow the virtues; and about art, follow one’s heart.” Another important thing I learned from this experience is to utilize the resources you have and never limit your vision. There is always a way to solve the problem. Sometimes the limitation you are facing can be a plus in improving the production. And, most importantly, never give up.

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APPENDIX A
***Once Ever* SHOOTING SCRIPT**

1. EXT. APARTMENT YARD - EARLY MORNING

LING (O.S.)

I was very disappointed when I first came to the US. I thought everybody lived in a house with a garden and swimming pool. However, it's even not as good as our house in Zhong Shan. There is a swimming pool here though, but over 200 households share it. It's good that nobody has ever tried to swim all together at the same time.

On this morning, exhausted, LING walks on the narrow pathway to her room, passing three neighbors.

2. INT. YONG & LING'S APARTMENT - EARLY MORNING

Ling opens the door. A very small room and filled with smoke. The blinds are drawn, there are 4 persons playing mahjong under the light. Three look up and glance at her and return to their game, one of them opens his mouth, but no words reach her ears. The fourth person, YONG sitting in the middle, paid full attention to his game.

YONG

Liubing. (Mahjong word)

The view pans from the Mahjong table to Ling, who just walked into the room. Ling leans her body against the wall with tired face. Changing her mind a second later, she walks to the bathroom.

3. INT. BATHROOM - EARLY MORNING

Ling takes off her uniform; she sits on the toilet seat cover.

Ling is falling asleep in the bathroom. A hand pulls her up, and when she opens her eyes, she sees a drowsy Yong barely standing.

YONG

Quickly!

4. INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Ling is back in the room, everybody is gone now. The Mahjong pieces are still on the table, the empty bottles and the ash tray are still in their places. She doesn't even look at them

and lies down on the mattress.

Yong comes out from the bathroom; he lies on the mattress as well.

Ling closes her eyes.

LING

What did you say yesterday? You want me to study?

YONG

Whatever, I don't care right now.

Yong's voice becomes weak, followed by his breathing.

5. INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Yong is working hard in the kitchen. The restaurant is full of people.

6. INT. CLINIC - NIGHT

Ling is cleaning glasses, emptying the trash.

7. EXT. APARTMENT WALKWAY - NIGHT

Yong and Ling lean against the railing in front of the door. One facing inside and the other facing outside.

LING

Whatever, being a cashier in a restaurant is fine.

YONG

No, it's not a take out shop. Brother Keong said that the taxes and accounting should be done by ourselves. Also, our English is too bad.

(Pause)

LING

I hope the test will not be too difficult. I haven't studied for three years. I don't know whether I can do it or not.

YONG

Just try. You're not aiming for a doctorate; it'll only take you a couple of months.

LING

(Pause)

Open a restaurant. Who knows how long it will take.

YONG

Think farther ahead, look, I'm an assistant cook now; we'll open when we have enough money.

LING

Where do I study? There's only one room here and you have a lots of friends over.

YONG

They have nothing to do. We will find a way, don't worry.

(pause)

March 5th, your last test, right?

LING

Pretty much.

YONG

We'll have dinner that night at that restaurant..."Bo" something?

Ling thinks for a second and then smiles.

8. EXT. BUS STOP - DAY (FLASHBACK)

At the bus stop, a bus just left. Yong and Ling, almost out of breath, are looking at the bus that just left.

Ling sits down; Yong paces around the bus stop and knits his brows.

They sit side by side. Yong motions ahead with his chin.

YONG

That is quite beautiful, eating in a garden, that's good, what is that called?

LING

Bo....something, I can't read it.

YONG

Wow, Look, Look! That big plate, is that abalone?

LING

Don't be dense, this is not Zhong Shan.

9. EXT. APARTMENT WALKWAY - NIGHT

LING

Ok. March 5th.

YONG

Ok. That's a deal.

10. INT. CHINESE CAFÉ - NIGHT

Yong and Ling are sharing a plate of ice slush.

11. EXT. SCHOOL - DAY

Ling walks around on a campus with a map in hand.

12. EXT. APARTMENT - DAY

Ling is back at home. The table is remains messy. Yong's little buddy, HAO, is watching a video. He glances up, smiles at Ling and returns to the movie. Yong comes out from the bathroom but Ling pushes him in again.

LING

Is Hao here for something?

YONG

No, he will stay here tonight.
You know, his step mother...

LING

The room is too small, it's not pleasant.

YONG

We are buddies.

LING

Then, what about me?

YONG

I'll sleep in the middle, what's wrong with that? You don't toss and turn right?

LING

Hang up a curtain.

Yong is about to lose his temper, he reaches for the door handle.

YONG

Whatever you say.

When they walk to the room, Hao has already fallen asleep in

a corner of the room.

Yong walks to the mattress, and Ling turns off the light and follows him unwillingly.

13. INT. PING'S DORM - NIGHT

The light is on. The room seems large, but really just barren. PING makes a path through the full clothesline in the room, Ling follows behind.

PING

Here.

(CONT'D)

The previous person staying here is in China for a lawsuit, and waiting for a return visa. I think she won't be back until after you finish your exam. There's no one here during the day, and it's good for studying.

LING

Thank you.

PING

Don't mention it. We're from the same place.

14. INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Ling is cleaning the room. She opens the curtain and looks out from the window; the sky above the inner courtyard is deep blue. Besides the two people talking up above in the third floor walkway, the whole complex looks empty to her. There are some kids playing in the central courtyard. Looking out from the walkway inside, the road is crowded with cars; it is very different with the silence inside the complex.

LING (V.O.)

After I moved to Ping's place, I still came back from time to time. There is always stuff I need to get; also Yong and his buddies need me too.

15. INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

Yong played with his friends.

Ling is washing dishes in the kitchen.

16. EXT. STREET - DAY

Ling stands on the traffic island on her way back from the market, waiting to cross to the other side.

LING (V.O.)

Sometimes I think: am I still in China? Everywhere is Chinese and people speak Chinese. The only difference is people here are busy and they need to drive. When I first came here, Yong brought me Hollywood to see the handprint of Brad Pitt. But that was an old street. I don't know where the America people used to talk about is. I found it difficult to get a driver's license but now that I have one, I'm scared to drive on the road. Except for driving to work, I even want to walk market, like those days in Zhong Shan.

(CONT'D)

Since I came to America, this is the first time I've been alone. I feel uncomfortable, like I'm walking in the dark, I don't know what's there.

17. EXT. APARTMENT COURTYARD - DAY

Ling is walking through the pathway to the apartment.

18. EXT. CAMPUS - DAY

Ling is walking.

19. INT. RESTAURANT KITCHEN - DAY

Yong is working.

20. INT. CLINIC - NIGHT

Ling is working when a person walks in and asks for directions. He speaks really fast. Ling is completely lost and does not know how to respond.

21. INT. NEWS STAND IN CHINATOWN - NIGHT

Yong is buying news paper.

23. INT. LIBRARY - NIGHT

Ling is looking for books.

24. INT. CHINESE CAFÉ - NIGHT

Yong is chatting with his buddies.

25. EXT. CAMPUS - DAY

Ling is talking with her friends.

26. INT. CHINESE CAFÉ - NIGHT

Hao is eating in a fast speed. Yong looks at him.

YONG

Do you really need to eat so
much?

Hao nods.

27. INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

While Yong plays with his friends, Ling reads in the kitchen.

28. EXT. CAMPUS - DAY

Ling looks at her test paper when she comes out of the building.

29. EXT. STREET - DAY

Ling is driving.

LING (V.O.)

These days I only sleep a
little, I didn't think this
could happen before, because the
days in California are so
different. I'm used to working
at night when I was with Yong.
During the day, I would sleep in
or stay at inside, never paying
attention to the deepness of the
blue sky of California. It's so
blue that you can't see anything
else. I wonder where the blue
sky ends. I will follow it to
wherever it goes.

30. INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Ling is cleaning the room. She stops and looks out the

window, thinking.

31. INT. CHINESE CAFÉ - NIGHT

Yong is reading Chinese news paper. Ling is looking outside of the window. Nobody touches the ice slush on the table.

32. EXT. PARKING LOT - DAY

Yong is on phone.

YONG

Is everybody there? ...okay, I
will be there in a minute.

Yong ends phonecall and turns to ling.

YONG

You go home first.

LING

Was today your day off?

YONG

I have something to do.

LING

It's so hard to see each other.

YONG

Didn't we just meet? Don't
bother me.

LING

Something to do? Is it mahjong
again? Which one is more
important? Your friends or me?

YONG

Don't be my boss.

Yong leaves.

33. INT. PING'S DORM - NIGHT

Ling is frozen staring at the window.

34. INT. PARK - DAY

Yong walks toward the clock tower, Ling is already there.

YONG

What happened? I am very busy
now.

(pause)

How was it? Did you pass?

Ling nods.

YONG

I said so. You can do it.

LING

Let's stop seeing each other.

YONG

Say it again.

LING

I mean, we'd better not to see each other.

Yong takes out cigarette and sits down.

YONG

How long have we been together?

(pause)

Didn't we say let's hang in there a little more.

LING

I don't want to open a restaurant.

YONG

Then, what do you want?

LING

I don't think opening a restaurant is the only thing we can do in America.

(pause)

Why did you come to America?

YONG

To change my life.

They keep talking.

YONG

Don't forget March 5th.

LING

Yong...

YONG

I'll be there.

Yong leaves. Only Ling remains there.

35. EXT. BACKYARD OF RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Yong is smoking.

36. INT. APARTMENT - DAY

CU of the calendar. It's March 5th.

37. EXT. BO'S RESTAURANT - DAY

Yong is smoking.

38. INT. APARTMENT - DAY

Ling writes a letter.

LING (V.O.)

Yong, forgive me for not showing up today. I just don't know how to explain this to you.

I forgot to tell you-I've been given an offer from Berkeley. It's in northern California. I am leaving tonight.

(pause)

Do you remember when we just got here, you asked if my dad was still mad at you? I think he worried about me. We chose our path in life, and we take responsibility on it.

Every body who chooses to come here has an American dream. However, only the person himself knows how to realize it.

Ling looks out the window.

(pause)

The experience of studying is so precious. I don't know how far I can go, but I believe I can do more things than before. You are kind and have great perseverance. Why don't you try?

(pause)

Yong, don't blame me. I don't know how to write this letter to you. We've been together for these years, no matter it was hard time or not. I know you are the person who cares about me the most.

She can't help but cry.

The note on table says-"To whoever finds this, I love you."

39. EXT. RESTAURANT ENTRANCE - NIGHT

Yong comes out of the restaurant. He finds out he's run out of cigarette.

40. EXT. CHINESE MARKET - NIGHT

Yong buys cigarettes, lights one, and looks at the crowded people in street.

FADE OUT

APPENDIX B
Once Ever **SUMMARY BUDGET**

ITEM	CASH	IN KIND	TOTAL
SALARIES	0	9750	9750
PRODUCTION DEPT	1160	860	2020
ART	50	300	350
CAMERA/LIGHTING	4100	1440	5540
AUDIO	660	0	660
TAPE STOCK	37.5	0	37.5
POST PRODUCTION	3014	1080	4094
CONTINGENCIES (10%)	902.15	1343	2245.15
GRAND TOTAL	9923.65	14773	24696.65

Budget breakdown				
ITEM	RATE	CASH	IN KIND	TOTAL
Principal talent	12days@ \$200/day		2400	2400
Supporting talent	6days@ \$75/day		450	450
Primary crew (DP, AD, Gaffer, Mixer, Art Director)	12days@ \$500/day		6000	6000
Production Assistant	12days@ \$75/day		900	900
Salaries TOTAL		0	9750	9750
Food	12days@ \$75/day	900		900
Photocopies		30		30
Office supplies		70		70
Misc.	Batteries, cables, etc.		100	100
Location Fees	8days@ 40/day	160	160	320
Insurance			600	600
Production Department TOTAL		1160	860	2020
Props			200	200
Wardrobe			100	100
Make up/Hair		50		50
Art Dep. TOTAL		50	300	350
DV camera		3500		3500
Camera accessories (field monitors, tripod, etc.)	12days@ \$50/day	600		600
Grip and Electronic (ARRI Kit, Flags, etc.)	12days@ \$120/day		1440	1440
Camera/Lighting TOTAL		4100	1440	5540

Shotgun mic and Boompole	12days@ \$55/day	660		660
Audio TOTAL		660	0	660
MiniDV tape	15×60min@ \$2.5	37.5		37.5
Tape stock TOTAL		37.5	0	37.5
DV Editing work Station		2000		2000
Rewinder		50		50
Editing Software		934		934
Audio Transfer			80	80
Blank DVD/CD media	10 CDs/3 DVDs	30		30
Music Recording			500	500
Music Rights			500	500
Post-production TOTAL		3014	1080	4094
Sub TOTAL		9021.5	13430	22451.5
CONTINGENCIES (10%)		902.15	1343	2245.15
GRAND TOTAL		9923.65	14773	24696.65

VITA

Yu Chen was born and raised in Beijing, China. He moved to Japan in 1990. He received a Bachelor's degree in Japanese from Daitobunka University and a Master's degree in Film Studies from Hitotsubashi University, both in Tokyo. For his Master's thesis he researched and analyzed Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942). Mr.Chen began his graduate studies at the University of New Orleans in the fall of 2002 pursuing an MFA in Film Production. After his graduation, he hopes to work in the entertainment industry in Asia as well as in the United States of America.